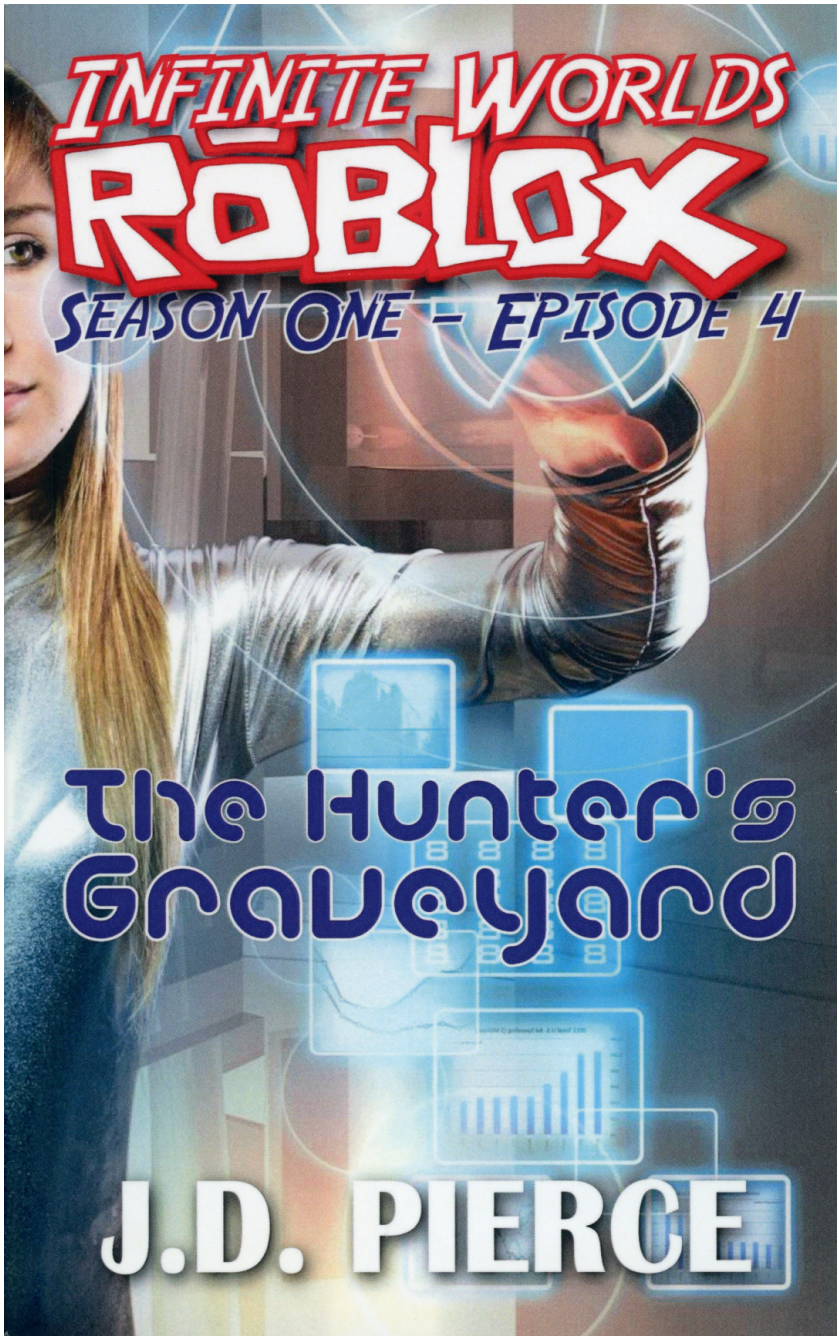
INFINITE WORLDS
ROBLOX
SEASON ONE - EPISODE 4
The Hunter's Graveyard
J.D. PIERCE

The Hunter's Graveyard

Infinite Worlds ROBLOX
Season One - Episode 4

by J.D. Pierce

Summary

The battle to save Earth begins online.

Season One - Episode 4

On the run, Max and Terri are driven into the underground, where they make a startling discovery that they were not the first to enter into this simulated world in search of Thomas. But the underground holds even more dangers for them at every turn.

INFINITE WORLDS ROBLOX unfolds over six books of approximately 150 pages each (20,000 words) with the first five books ending in epic cliffhangers.

This book is a work of fiction. References to real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales are intended only to provide a sense of authenticity, and are used fictitiously. All other characters, and all incidents and dialogue, are drawn from the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real.

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Please support the author of the Infinite Worlds Roblox series, Steve DeWinter: https://bit.ly/SteveDeWinter-AZ

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Chapter 1

As they fell into the inky blackness, Terri could barely hear her own shrieking voice over Max's terrified screams.

For some reason, the man who had tackled them and dove headfirst into the open manhole remained silent. It was as if he did this all the time. She hadn't even learned his name before trusting him with her life. A life that was soon coming to an end if the pitch black pit wasn't bottomless.

She stopped screaming to catch her breath and heard the sudden puff of compressed air being released followed by the whine of a metallic cable unspooling quickly. Above them she heard a thunk of something solid embedding in the walls and then they began to slow down. She could feel the bulk of her body's weight increase as they decelerated.

She flipped upright unexpectedly and the ground impacted softly with her feet. She was suddenly standing in the darkness, silence closing in on them as Max stopped screaming.

Had they hit the bottom and died?

That didn't make sense. If they were dead they would be re-spawning back at the players' entrance to Arcadia. She didn't feel dead. And she could sense a hint of ambient light all around her.

A spear of light suddenly pierced the gloom and she raised a hand defensively as her eyes involuntarily squeezed shut. "Hey!"

The man who had saved them slapped the light away. "Go blind somebody else, Albert."

Albert lowered the flashlight, the spill of light illuminating everything around them in deep shadows. "Sorry, Desmond."

Albert spun around and walked down the tunnel. Desmond glanced at Terri, nodding in the direction Albert went before following him. Max and Terri looked at each other and then jogged

to catch up.

Max squinted around him in the dim light. He caught up and fell alongside Desmond as they walked. “Thanks for saving me and all, but I really have to get back to work. I have a lot of explaining to do about what happened to my hover bike. And my boss isn’t going to believe any of it.”

Desmond peered at Max in the faint light. “What are you talking about?”

Terri moved forward. “He’s been re-written. He doesn’t remember anything.”

Desmond shook his head. “I was afraid we might be too late.” He looked at Albert. “Let the Oracle know that Max is no longer useful. Maybe he can discover another way out using only Terri.”

Max and Terri both stopped walking, giving each other a panicked expression. She knew exactly why he was afraid. She was starting to feel a little unnerved herself and ran to catch up with Desmond. “Excuse me. How do you know our names?”

Desmond gave her a quizzical look, like she should already know this answer. “The Oracle told us you were coming. Just like the others.”

“The others?” she asked.

He smiled, “You didn’t think you were the first, did you?”

Her mind was reeling. What was he talking about? “The first?” she said aloud.

Desmond stopped and faced them. “Chester strapped you into the extractor and sent you in after Thomas. Just like he did with Albert, me, and the rest of us down here.”

Terri frowned in the growing darkness as Albert kept walking away. “The rest? How many did Chester send in before us?”

It was getting almost too dark to see as Desmond continued down

the tunnel without answering her. She caught up to him and grabbed his arm, spinning him around. “How many more were sent in before us?”

Desmond glared at her. “Over the course of several months, ten of us were strapped into those extractors and sent into this world to find Thomas.”

Terri’s brow furled. “Ten of you? But you never showed up on the list of players.”

Desmond shook his head. “Chester used the NPC code to insert all of us in here.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you are stuck in here, like us, until Chester decides to let you out. That is if he decides to let you out.”

Terri’s heart pounded loudly. “Why wouldn’t he let me out?”

Albert stopped at a steel door that was slick with water running down its rusted surface. Desmond twisted the handle and pushed it open. “The same reason he didn’t let us out I suppose.”

The door opened to a dimly lit cavern. Terri followed Desmond and Albert through the door. Max hesitated for a moment at the door before entering the chamber behind them.

All around were men in dingy gray clothing. Piles of broken items and trash were organized in unmarked but obviously well-defined zones along the walls on either side of the long chamber. Homeless men crouched in the midst of their respective mounds and glared warily at Terri and Max, ready to protect their precious treasure from these new intruders.

Desmond continued past the men. “Don’t worry. They won’t harm you as long as you don’t touch their stuff.”

Terri walked down the center of the room, keeping as far away from the men on either side as possible. “Did Chester send in all these people before us?”

“Yes,” Desmond replied.

“What happened to them?”

“They died too many times and lost themselves. Since none of us can physically die, this place has become a living graveyard for the forsaken hunters.”

“Why did he abandon everyone?”

Desmond shrugged and kept walking through the center of the open space. “If I ever get out of here I’ll be sure to ask him.”

Terri scanned the faces of the once proud warriors sent in to retrieve Thomas. Shifting eyes scrutinized her as she walked past each garbage strewn encampment. If she succeeded where they had failed, could she do something to help them as well?

Desmond stopped at a door on the other side of the chamber and looked at them. “I need to announce you to the Oracle. Please stay here until I come for you.”

He didn’t wait for a response and disappeared through the rusted door. The clank of the door slamming shut echoed in the chamber. She looked around, but none of the men huddled among their meager belongings reacted to the loud noise.

Terri looked at Max and she could see how she felt reflected in his eyes. He was just as unhappy to be here as she was. He looked at her as if he wanted to say something.

She crossed her arms, tired of his little lost puppy dog act, and glared back. “What?”

Chapter 2

Max cleared his throat and mumbled, “Do you think you can ask someone to take me back now?”

She gave him a funny look and didn’t respond. Instead, she glanced at the door that Desmond had disappeared through as if he would reappear at any moment.

Max knew he wasn’t who she thought he was. He needed to get out of here, wherever here was, and back home to his upper level apartment.

Old man Feeney would have a heyday if he knew what had happened to Max. Assassins in limousines, entire buildings leveled, and secret underground bases filled with humanity’s discarded. Not to mention someone called “The Oracle.”

Yeah, Max thought to himself, this was right up Feeney’s alley. Feeney was obsessed with all the conspiracy theories on the CitiNet. He had to have heard something about this place and the people living here. When he made it home, he would have to ask him about all of this.

Max had no doubt he would only get part of the truth from these people. But Feeney would tell him everything. He would probably tell him more than he wanted to know.

Max glanced sideways to see the girl staring at him again. He tried to look away, as if interested in a spot on the wall, but couldn’t shake the shiver that ran up and down his spine as he felt her eyes on him.

He finally turned to her. “What was your name again?”

She smiled. “Terri.”

“Well, Terri. I don’t know who you think I am, but I am just a humble pizza delivery guy. I should be out making pitiful tips. But instead, I have been caught in something that doesn’t have anything

to do with me."

Terri took a step closer and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry, Max. We'll get you back."

Max's heart thumped loudly and he let out a quick breath, releasing the tension that had built up in his lower back. "Thank you. I was beginning to think you were stuck on thinking I was someone else."

She frowned. "I know who you are, Max."

He stared into her eyes. "I don't think you do."

She moved in uncomfortably close. "You told me you would never forget that kiss we shared at Noah's party."

"What are you talking about?"

Before he knew what was happening, Terri leaned in and kissed him on the lips.

Chapter 3

Terri kept her eyes closed as she pulled away. She opened them slowly and peered into Max's stunned face. She studied him intently. This would surely make him remember. She knew he always secretly liked her. What she never let on was how much she secretly liked him too.

If anyone could break through what the agents had done to him, it was her. The bond between them was stronger than anything in the universe. Maybe she was letting her feelings get the better of her, but she knew deep down in her heart that nothing could keep them apart.

Nothing.

Max swallowed loudly and looked around before focusing back on her. "What was that for?"

"Do you remember who you are? Do you remember me? Do you remember us?"

Max's face went through a series of emotions before he gave her a steely stare. "You've got the wrong guy."

Her heart fell.

Was Max lost to her forever?

"Max. There is no going back to what you think is your home. We have to get you to remember who you are…"

"I know who I am," he spat back, interrupting her.

"No! You don't! You've been given new memories, but they are not who you are."

"You keep saying that, but…"

She slapped him.

Hard.

He touched a hand to his stunned face. “Ow! What’s wrong with you?!”

She tilted her head at him, looking deeply into his eyes. “Do you remember anything now?”

“I remember everything.”

She took a quick breath, surprised that it had worked. “You do?”

“Yeah,” Max scowled at her as he rubbed his cheek and looked away. “I remember that someone tried to kill me while I was delivering a stupid pizza. And now I’m in some underground homeless shelter being slapped around by a girl I just met.”

She wanted to slap him again out of frustration. But it wouldn’t do any good. He hadn’t simply forgotten who he was. He had been re-written. Striking him again wouldn’t just fix him like how hitting a flashlight miraculously made the connection between the batteries work again.

Max turned from her and walked a few steps away. She had to figure out how to get Max’s memories back to him. Maybe the Oracle could restore them. She hadn’t programmed anything in here to act like an oracle. So, if he was something else, or someone else, maybe he could help them.

What about Ecks? He seemed to know a lot about what was happening. She thought about how they had left him lying unconscious in the doorway of the building at the mercy of the approaching agents.

She wondered if she would ever see him again before this was all over.

Chapter 4

Ecks heard the muted voices coming at him like he was at the other end of a long, dark tunnel.

“Juan Ecks?” the disembodied voice repeated. Ecks opened his eyes and stared up at the face of an agent bent over him.

“Get up!” the agent demanded.

The agent took a step back as Ecks propped himself up on one elbow and looked around. He was lying in the doorway of a bankrupt clothing store that had been shuttered long ago. Max and Terri were nowhere to be seen and he was surrounded by at least a dozen agents with an even mix of Smiths and Jones’.

He stood up slowly, focusing his attention on the Jones standing closest to him, “Where are Max and Terri?”

Jones stepped sideways and pointed at the open manhole cover. Ecks grabbed Jones by the collar and pulled him close, their noses nearly touching. “You let them escape?!”

Jones’ face remained emotionless. “We cannot follow them underground. There is no signal.”

Ecks shoved Jones away before spinning around and channeling his wrath on the glass doors of the defunct store. He kicked at them, sending glass fragments bouncing around his feet. He continued yelling in a rage as he stomped on the shattered pieces lying on the concrete, grinding them into a fine powder under his boot.

When there was nothing left to destroy, he spun around and glared at Jones. “Find them!”

Jones glanced at the hole in the ground. “But… they are underground.”

Ecks drew his pistol and shot him. Jones screamed in agony and faded away. Ecks looked around at the other agents gathered

around him. “Anyone else have a problem with my simple instructions?”

The closest Smith moved forward. “We will place agents at all the egress points. As soon as they leave the underground, we will have them.”

Ecks holstered his gun and smiled, patting Smith on the cheek. “Finally, one of my programs is starting to think for himself. Good work, Smith.”

Without a word the agents scattered in several directions, leaving Ecks alone. He walked over to the open manhole and stared down into the pit of darkness.

Only integrated programs could access the underground. Without access to an outside signal, none of his agents could enter the one place the Oracle called home. It also meant he could not follow them.

His plan had been to bring them to the Speaker at the library and lure the Oracle out, using the kids as bait.

Now the Oracle had them and Ecks would have to find another way to get to the Oracle.

He couldn’t go underground.

Nor could his agents.

But there was someone who could.

Someone who had no allegiance to the Oracle.

Ecks accessed the administrative console with a wave of his hand and called back one of his agents.

Jones suddenly appeared before him and snapped to attention. “What is it, Sir?”

“Find me the one who attacked Max earlier. I wish to speak with him. Let me know the second you have him.”

Jones nodded and then disappeared again.

Anyone watching would have freaked out. But Ecks wasn't worried about someone seeing his magical god-like powers in this part of town. Most everyone had already been driven away by the brutal and destructive attack on the library.

Ecks surveyed the damage to the city around him. This section was already so run down, he wondered if anyone would notice what had happened after the fires died and the smoke cleared.

"No matter," he said aloud. "None of this will be relevant in a few days."

He took a deep breath and faded from view.

Chapter 5

Terri and Max sat cross-legged on the floor outside the door. After nearly half an hour of waiting, Albert had excused himself while mumbling something about perimeter patrol. After what seemed like another hour of waiting the steel door squeaked open on rusted hinges and Desmond came out. He shined the flashlight on them. “The Oracle is ready,” he said and then spun on his heels and went back through the door.

Terri stood slowly, her joints aching from sitting in one position for too long, and followed Desmond. “Can the Oracle restore Max’s memories?”

“Maybe,” he replied. “It depends on what was used to re-write him.”

Desmond turned around. “Max, what was the last thing…?” Desmond froze and looked around. “Where is he?”

Terri stopped. She had expected Max to stand up and follow her just as she had followed Desmond. She ran back to the open door and looked at the spot where they had been sitting,

He was gone!

Desmond was right behind her. He stepped out and approached one of the homeless men leaning against a wall. “Where did the boy go?”

The man looked up at him and showed his toothless gap-filled smile but didn’t answer.

“Where is he?!” Desmond demanded again.

Without saying a word, the man pointed toward the main entrance to the cavern.

Desmond glanced around the open space quickly, the beam of his flashlight piercing the dimness that filled the cavern. “He won’t get

far on his own. Follow me."

Desmond raced toward the entrance. Terri ran to keep up with him, tripping over the garbage strewn about the floor but maintaining her balance as she struggled to keep up.

From deep within the shadows to her right, she heard a scuffle and a strangled cry for help.

Desmond stopped running and shined his flashlight into the darkness toward the sound.

One of the homeless men had his arm wrapped around Max's neck and was pulling him further into the darkness.

Desmond shined his light into the old man's eyes. "Let him go, Wayne."

Wayne squinted against the blinding beam and tightened his grip on Max's neck. "I'm tired of living like this, Desmond. I want to go home."

Desmond slowly walked forward. "The Oracle is working on that. We will all be going home soon."

Wayne took a step backward. "None of us are going home. The Oracle is a liar."

Desmond lowered his flashlight, but kept them illuminated at the edge of his light. "You and I both know the Oracle is incapable of lying."

"Then why hasn't he found an answer yet. He's supposed to be all-powerful. But he can't find a way home. Well. I know how to get home, and Thomas here is my ticket."

Desmond shined the light on Max's face. "Look, Wayne. That's not Thomas."

'Don't lie to me!" Wayne spat back. "You were going to keep him all for yourself. Well, he's mine now."

Wayne tossed a cylindrical object on the ground in front of him and pulled Max away quickly. The object rolled toward Desmond and Terri emitting an intensifying beeping sound. Desmond followed it with his light and then moved quickly, tackling Terri to the ground as the device exploded.

Chapter 6

Ecks appeared in the middle of the park where two of his agents held their guns pointed at the man sitting calmly on a bench.

Ecks walked up and sat down next to the man who gave him a sideways glance. “It wasn’t necessary for your goons to hold me at gunpoint. If you wanted to meet with me, all you had to do was ask.”

“I didn’t think you would stick around unless I made sure you couldn’t leave.”

The man moved so quickly, he was nearly a blur as he took out both agents before they could react. Their screams still hung in the air long after they had evaporated. He stood in front of Ecks, pointing both weapons at him. He wasn’t even breathing hard and looked as if he had just taken a leisurely stroll through the park.

Ecks’ eyes never wavered from the man’s face, ignoring the fact that he was facing down the barrels of two powerful weapons. “Impressive.”

The man smiled and tilted his head. “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet.”

Ecks licked his lips and smirked “And yet, you were unable to capture the pizza delivery boy.”

The man’s face darkened. “A minor setback.”

Ecks chuckled. “I know why you want him.”

“Oh really? Enlighten me.”

Ecks took a deep breath and let it out slowly, dragging out the time before he responded. “You are one of the soldiers sent in by Chester to find the alien known as Thomas. But doing that has inherent risks. Risks that have resulted in many of your comrades losing their minds. For some reason, you haven’t lost your cognizance like the rest, but you are stuck here all the same;

trapped in a fabricated world. Unable to escape by any method…" Ecks held up a finger. "Save for one. Find out who is currently plugged into the extractor and exit through their connection. That is why you want him."

The man's hands shook slightly, the ends of the guns vibrating with his sudden onset nervousness. "How do you know all this? Did Chester send you to stop me?"

Ecks smiled. "No. I don't care about the boy. You can have him if you help me."

He lowered the guns, letting them fall to his side. "Help you with what?"

"Help me get the ultimate prize, of course. I want Thomas. Once I have him, the other boy is yours."

"Why would I help you? I can just get the boy myself."

"And how is that going for you?"

The man frowned. "I'll get him."

Ecks shook his head. "But, you see, I already have him."

The man gave him a long stare before responding. "What are the odds that you would have exactly what I want?"

Ecks laughed. "Very low. But in this case, they are one hundred percent. I already have Max. But I need Thomas."

The man looked around. "Where is he?"

"He's not here. But I am in contact with my associate who has him."

The man squinted at him. "How do I know I can trust you?"

"You don't have to," Ecks responded. "The boy trusts me. And Thomas trusts him. That's all the trust we need to both get what we want."

The man looked out over the park. “What do you want me to do?”

Ecks smiled. “First, I’d like to know who l am allying with and how committed you are to accomplishing our mutual goals.”

The man looked back at him. “My name’s Ajax Cortez. And I’ll do whatever it takes to get out of here.”

Ecks looked into the distance. “Ah, warlike Ajax, son of Telamon. They say you are the bravest of the Grecians who came to Troy, next to Achilles.”

Ajax’s brow furled. “What?”

Ecks looked back at him. “It’s a small verse from an ancient Greek song circa 5th century BC.”

“My father’s name wasn’t Telamon.”

Ecks chuckled. “Of course it wasn’t.” He stood up and looked down at Ajax. “Now, let’s go get what we both want.”

Chapter 7

Terri's lungs spasmed from the acrid smoke that filled them. She lay among the rubble and coughed repeatedly, trying to clear them.

Desmond rolled to his hands and knees and sat up, coughing harshly as he peered into the haze. All around them the space was filled with strewn debris and people lying motionless on the ground.

The vibrating staccato of a fan spinning faster echoed through the chamber and drew the smoke and dust up quickly through rusted vents in the ceiling.

One by one the men who had been caught in the blast radius got to their feet and silently began gathering their meager belongings back into random piles as if this happened all the time.

Desmond stood, helping Terri up with him. She coughed out the last of the fine dust as the air in the room cleared. She glanced around, her eyes confirming what she knew in her heart.

Max was gone.

Again.

Desmond cleared his throat. "There is no time. You must speak with the Oracle."

He held her arm tightly and pulled her toward the door at the back of the chamber. His grip was like a vice turned once too many times.

"Ow!" she complained. "You're hurting me."

"The pain to your arm is the least of your worries."

"Do you have to squeeze so hard?"

Desmond stopped short and spun her around violently, glaring at her. "I've resigned myself to being stuck in this world for the rest of

my life, which right now means forever since I can't die." He looked around the room dramatically before focusing on her again. "But not all of us have given in to the realities of our situation. Wayne is going to use Max to get out. If we don't stop him, Max will be the one stuck in here forever."

His grip was getting tighter, the agony in her arm increasing, but she refused to let her face show how much he was hurting her. Instead she gritted her teeth and glared back at him, "How do we stop him?"

Desmond eased up and finally let go. "I'm sorry. I forget that we are all in this together. I just don't want to see you kids getting stuck in here too."

A thought occurred to her. "How long have you been in this world?"

He pointed to a disheveled man in the corner who was muttering to himself while scooping garbage into a pile. "Julien there has been inside the longest. Nearly a year."

She thought back to all the times she and Max had been in Level Arcadia. Desmond kept watching Julien piling garbage.

"In the beginning, we didn't know about the psychological stress that constantly dying and being reborn had on the mind. Once that came out, Chester designed a buffer program that would redirect the confusion caused by the re-spawning process into a need for order. It was supposed to reduce, if not eliminate, the tricky conundrum of the brain experiencing death and then coming back again."

He surveyed all the broken minds around the underground chamber. "But it never fully cleared the insanity that built with each death. As we died, and became less effective, Chester finally unplugged us and sent in the next team. And the next. And the next…"

His voice trailed off as Terri looked at the fallen soldiers sent in before her and Max. "Are all of you down here?"

Desmond snapped out of his silent trance and wiped away the tear that rolled down one cheek. A sign that, despite being trapped forever in a computer generated world, he was still human. “Ajax was a tough soldier and personal friend of mine. I was the one who recommended him to be on the first team to go after Thomas. He and Julien were loaded in together. Ajax was the first to go insane. And he is the reason the rest of us are down here. He started hunting us instead of Thomas. Killing us every chance he got until we were all driven mad.”

She looked around at the shadowy figures hunched in their respective piles of trash. One man had done all this?

Why hadn’t Chester told her or Max about what was really happening inside their ROBLOX world?

What else had he kept from them?

Chapter 8

Chester spun the scroll wheel rapidly on his mouse. Files blurred by on his screen too fast to see the individual names.

He wasn't even looking at the files as they scrolled by. He was too distracted by the fact that both Max and Terri had disappeared. Disappeared like all the rest.

Had Ajax Cortez gotten to them? He was supposed to have been the best and the brightest elite super-soldier that the Navy had to offer.

Chester stopped scrolling and scanned the list on his screen. The name he was looking for was not there, but he was getting closer among the petabytes of data stored in the building-sized Blue Waters Supercomputer. It was the second such petascale supercomputer built by Cray and it was built exclusively for Chester's project. Its very existence was so secretive, even the funding for the project was hidden among several other top-secret black projects of the NSA.

Chester let out a long breath as he continued to scroll through thousands of files again. His mind wandered to Max and Terri. He had sent them in knowing the kind of danger they faced. He thought he had given them the tools to fight against Ajax by preparing them to fight against the agents.

He couldn't tell them that their biggest threat in the game was the one he had sent in there. They would never trust him after that. And they certainly wouldn't have agreed to be strapped into the same equipment that had been used on so many before who never returned.

All his life, he had been forced to fabricate new truths to deal with the simpletons around him. But for the first time in his life, he was actually feeling remorse.

Maybe it was because they were young like him. They weren't trained soldiers who had accepted the risks of their chosen

professions.

They were just kids. Sure, they were older than Chester, but they weren't prepared to go up against a highly trained super-soldier who had forged himself into the ultimate weapon; both in and out of the game.

He stopped scrolling as he recalled the look on Terri's face while she was being strapped into the extractor. She was willing to help save the world, but she was afraid. He had seen the look of sheer terror in her eyes.

None of the soldiers he had placed into the extractors had ever looked afraid. Even if they felt it, they never let it show.

But she was different.

She was a teenager not ready to put her life on the line in a virtual world more dangerous than the real one. And Chester sent her there because he had to. Because of their connection with Thomas.

He glanced at the monitor. The file he wanted was dead center among the list. It was hidden among millions of other files, most of which were filler to hide the true nature of this one tiny file.

He had written this program as the equivalent of a dead man's switch. He knew what no one else in the world could know unless they were as smart as he was. There was only one way to save all of humanity should they fail to obtain Thomas within the timeline. Chester's solution was extreme, but it was the only one he had left to play if the aliens were coming in less than a week.

His heart raced as he moved the mouse cursor to hover over the executable file.

It was time to make up for his past mistakes by making one last big one. He had gone over every possible scenario in his head, no matter how far-fetched it seemed. When all other options failed, his play would be the only one left standing. This was the only choice he had to make.

He double clicked on the file and his computer screen flickered right before a bright red warning box appeared urging him to reconsider his decision.

He clicked the confirmation option only to be presented with a new warning that his request could not be undone once started.

He closed his eyes as he clicked past this second warning and listened to the increased hum from the levels below him as one of the world's most powerful supercomputers carried out his instructions.

Chapter 9

Desmond stopped just inside another door and waited for Terri to join him. They had left behind the dust and destruction and were in a brightly lit hallway with a single unguarded door at the other end.

He turned sideways and motioned toward the door. “Through there is the Oracle. Be sure to lock the door once you are inside or he will not reveal himself to you.”

Her heart skipped a beat. “Aren’t you coming?”

He shook his head. “Very few have been granted access. I am not one of them.”

She frowned. “Have you ever met the Oracle?”

“No. Never.”

“Then how do you know he will speak to me?”

“I’ve been in to see the Oracle stone, but he has only left printed messages with instructions. He has never revealed himself to me.”

“Then how do you know he wants to speak with me?”

“He asked to speak with you and Max; by name.”

The blood rushed to her head and the room started spinning. Desmond reached out and caught her before she fell. His eyes showed only concern for her welfare. “Are you okay?”

She recovered quickly and straightened. “Let’s get this over with. Do you think he can tell me where to find Thomas?”

“If anyone can, it’s him.”

She walked toward the door and placed a hand on the knob, looking back at Desmond. He was gone. She hadn’t even heard the door close; he had done it so silently.

She turned back.

She alone had to decide to enter the room.

Or not.

She twisted the handle, not sure what was on the other side.

She pushed on the door and entered the room, holding her breath as she did.

Terri really hadn't given much thought as to what the Oracle might look like, but what she saw in front of her was the last thing she had expected.

She was in a small bedroom with a tiny desk at one end. The computer that sat on it was an older model, like the one in the corner of her dad's garage. It had the same boxy cathode ray tube monitor rather than the thin sleek LCD monitors used everywhere today. He told her it was the first computer he had learned to write code with when he was a kid and he couldn't find it in himself to throw it out.

She closed the door and locked it, just like Desmond had instructed.

The monitor flickered to life and a blurry face appeared on it. "Who enters the domain of the Oracle?" a voice echoed from speakers sitting on either side of the ancient CRT monitor.

She stepped forward, saying the first thing that popped into her head. "It is I, Terri."

The face shifted slightly, getting larger on the screen. "Terri? Is that really you?"

She glanced around her in confusion before looking at the cloudy face. "Do you know me?"

The face suddenly sharpened to crystal clarity and smiled at her. It looked vaguely familiar.

“It’s me. Noah. Where’s Max?”

Terri suddenly felt very light headed and the room tilted awkwardly to one direction and then went dark as she passed out.

Chapter 10

Max struggled against Wayne who pulled him through one underground tunnel after another.

“Where are you taking me?” Max demanded.

“Silence!” Wayne spat back as he unlocked another door with a small key, shoving it back into his pocket and pulling Max through, as it closed with a loud hiss behind them.

He finally tossed Max to the ground. Max rolled to his feet and was ready to attack when he found himself staring down the twin barrels of a shotgun. Max guessed the loose folds of the man’s clothing hid plenty of secrets. His eyes focused on the grinning face at the other end of the shotgun.

“I wouldn’t,” Wayne said. “Now sit!” he barked as he jerked the end of the gun barrel sideways, indicating something to Max’s left.

Max spotted the chair in the corner of the small room that the gun-wielding maniac had indicated. Wayne tossed him a pair of handcuffs as soon as he sat down. “Lock yourself to the pipe.”

Max inspected the rusty pipe that came up through the floor, crawled up the wall, and along the ceiling. He looked at Wayne. “I promise I won’t go anywhere.”

Wayne responded by pointing the shotgun at him again. “Lock yourself up!”

Max slapped one end of the handcuffs over his wrist and secured the other around the pipe. As soon as the cuff ratcheted down with several rapid clicks, he tugged on it to prove that he was securely chained to the pipe.

Wayne set the shotgun down on the table next to the chair and turned his back, dialing a number on his cell phone before sticking it to his ear. Max looked at the shotgun that was within reach of his free hand.

He glanced up at Wayne who still had his back to him as he spoke on the phone. “Tell Mr. Ecks, I am ready to meet.”

Max grabbed the gun with one hand and maneuvered it awkwardly around, but still managed to point it at Wayne.

“Let me go!” he shouted.

Wayne spun around and his face froze in surprise.

“Unlock me! NOW!” Max bellowed.

Wayne raised the phone back to his ear. “No sir. Everything here is under control. I will be there shortly.”

He shut off the phone and tucked it into a pocket before leaning against the table, a mere couple of feet in front of the shotgun. “And what do you propose to do if I don’t?”

“At this range, the shotgun will tear a foot wide hole in your body.”

Wayne smiled. “Then I guess I have no choice.”

“No. You don’t.”

Wayne moved suddenly. Max fumbled the shotgun as he tried to keep it pointed at Wayne as he walked briskly toward the door. “But I have a problem. Mr. Ecks has promised me something in exchange for you. And if I don’t deliver you, he will do something far worse than send me back to the spawn point with less of my mind intact.”

Wayne stopped at the door with his hand on the handle. “Besides, I don’t think you have the guts to shoot me.”

Max hesitated. Was the man right? Could he shoot? Would he shoot?

He tossed the gun down at his feet and slouched in the chair.

Wayne shook his head as he opened the door. “I didn’t think so. It

was unloaded anyway."

Max's mouth hung open in surprise. Had the shotgun been empty this entire time? Wayne left the room and closed the door, leaving Max alone. Max made a move to kick away the shotgun when he paused. He picked up the shotgun and cracked open the barrel. Wayne was right. It was empty.

But it was still long and made from strong metal. It could still be useful. He wedged it between the pipe and the wall and used it to pry at the section of pipe he was handcuffed to.

The pipe groaned, but eventually broke free and the handcuffs clattered down his wrist.

He was going to actually escape.

He glanced at the only door to the small room. He tried to remember the path they had taken to get here. It was a blur of identical- looking tunnels and way too many turned corners to count. His only hope was to head back for the surface and see if he could make it home.

Home was safe.

Besides, Mr. Feeney wouldn't let anyone near his apartment without a thorough background check and intense interrogation. What would he tell Feeney about what had happened to him this morning?

Forget Feeney.

What was he going to tell his boss?

Before he could even worry about whether he had a job or not, he had to get out of wherever he was.

He slowly opened the door and peered out.

Wayne was sitting in a chair several feet down the tunnel; watching him.

He smiled. “Ecks said you were resourceful. That took you less than a minute to escape.” He raised a pistol and pointed it at Max. “This one is loaded, so don’t entertain any notions of getting it from me. Go ahead and lock both wrists in your cuffs.” He stood and motioned down the tunnel. “Shall we?”

Max secured the shackle around his other wrist and walked ahead of Wayne down the tunnel. It looked like he had a little more time to come up with a believable excuse for his boss at the pizza place.

Chapter 11

Terri woke with a start. Her vision was filled with the dark grain of the wood plank flooring. She coughed abruptly, dust discharging along the floor in a smoky puff of air.

"Terri? Are you still there?"

She sat up and looked at Noah's face on the monitor. "Noah?"

The concerned look on his face melted as he smiled. "Oh good, you're okay."

She climbed onto a chair and faced the monitor. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Max gave me admin credentials to interact with the NPC programs. I'm just testing the Al to make sure they behave like real people. I must say, I'm impressed with how well you programmed them. They are always catching me by surprise. I mean, look at all this. They started calling me the Oracle and listened to everything I said like they were consulting with the ancient Greek gods or something. You wouldn't believe some of the stuff they have come up with. I mean, you couldn't make some of this up. But then again, I guess you could. You wrote them after all."

He suddenly looked at her strangely. "What are you doing in the game? Max's parents told everyone that you were both sick and had to go to a naval hospital. Imagine my surprise when I saw your IDs pop up in the NPC list. How come you logged in under the NPC coding?" He glanced back and forth again. "And where is Max?"

Her shoulder's dropped. "I don't know. Someone took him and it doesn't look good."

Noah frowned. "What are you talking about?"

She told him everything that had happened since Major General Braxton had come for them in the middle of the night. She told him about Thomas, about Chester, about the extraction machines that

sent her and Max's life force into ROBLOX, about the other soldiers sent in before them, and how an alien invasion was bearing down on the Earth in a matter of days; if not hours. She didn't hold anything back. It felt good to say everything out loud no matter how crazy it sounded.

It was liberating.

She couldn't believe that it had only been a few hours since her and Max had been downloaded into the computer world. It felt like they had been in there forever.

As she was finishing, Noah waved his arms in front of him. "Wait a second. The news told us that all flights across the United States were grounded because of a freak solar storm. Not because aliens had taken over our missiles."

She lowered her gaze. "There's a storm coming all right. But it's not what the news said. The aliens have promised to destroy everything if we don't hand over Thomas to them when they arrive. And by my calculations, we don't have much time left before that happens."

Noah stared at her for a long time before responding. "So, everything these guys have been telling me is true, including their belief that I'm this all-powerful oracle?"

She nodded.

"And you are not logged in like normal."

She shook her head. "No. I'm actually here. Well, at least my mind is. I don't know how else to explain it."

Noah looked down. She could hear him typing on his keyboard as he spoke. "You don't have to explain any more. I have two choices. Believe you or not." He looked back at her with a half-smile. "I've chosen to believe you. And I think I've located Thomas."

She sat up. It was the first bit of good news she had in what felt like forever. "You can tell me where to find him?"

“Hold on. Yeah. I’m just calling his location up on a map.”

“Is he far?”

Noah squinted at something off-screen and then looked at Terri. “He’s close to where you are now. And if I’m reading this right, he’s getting closer.”

Chapter 12

Max stumbled and collapsed to his knees. His muscles ached and his vision blurred from the sweat running into his eyes.

“Get up!” Wayne commanded as he jabbed him in the back with the barrel of the gun.

Max spun around and lashed out, trying to knock the gun from Wayne’s grip. Wayne had anticipated his attempt and jumped back. Max’s big swing cut through empty air and sent him spiraling to the ground. Wayne smiled at him with an evil grin. “Nice try, kid.” He pointed the gun at him, his finger flexing on the trigger. “Keep moving.”

Max stood up and glared at Wayne. “What do you want from me? I’m just a pizza delivery guy.”

“Right,” Wayne spat out with a laugh. “Just a pizza delivery guy. And I’m some homeless person living underground. You and I both know that’s not true.”

“Okay,” Max replied. “But I don’t belong here.”

Wayne waved the gun around him wildly. “I don’t belong here anymore than you do. But you are my ticket out of here.”

“I don’t have any money. Everyone pays for their pizza before I deliver it. I don’t carry any cash unless I get a tip. I was on my first delivery of the day. I don’t have any tips yet. If you’ll let me go and finish my job. I promise to come back and give you a cut of my take. Heck, I’ll give you all of my tips if you want.”

Wayne gave him a curious look. “I don’t want your money.”

“Then what do you want?”

“I want to go home.”

“How is kidnapping me going to help you do that?”

“You’re still connected. So is the girl.”

Max frowned. “If I had connections, do you think I’d be delivering pizzas? I barely make my monthly rent. I’m not connected to anyone,”

Wayne studied him silently for a moment and was about to say something when he froze and glanced into the darkness of the tunnel ahead of them.

Max stared into the darkness, but couldn’t see anything. “What are you…?”

“Shh!” Wayne said and then pointed the gun into the tunnel and fired several shots.

Bullets pinged off the cement walls and the reports of his multiple gunshots echoed repeatedly until they died down in the remote distance. Wayne was still peering down the tunnel when a shadowy boy-sized shape charged into the faint light and slammed head first into Wayne.

The gun flew from his grasp and skittered across the floor straight toward Max. As Wayne grappled with his attacker, Max stumbled forward and groped around the loose trash at his feet, feeling for the gun that had slid near him.

His hands wrapped around the hard metal handle. He lifted the gun up and pointed it at the combatants. “Stop!” he commanded, firing off a warning shot over their heads and into the ceiling.

Wayne dove sideways and disappeared down a side tunnel before Max could get off another shot. The boy slowly stood and Max snapped the gun back on him. “Don’t move!”

He froze and raised his hands. “I’m not here to hurt you, Max.”

Max’s head spun from the shock of what he just said but he was able to keep the gun steady. “How do you know my name?”

The boy shrugged. “I make it a point to find out everything I can about who is after me.”

“After you? You were the one who attacked us.”

He smiled. “You can put down the gun.”

“Not until you tell me who you are.”

“You know who I am.”

“I’m having a little trouble with names lately.

Why don’t you just tell me?”

The boy stared at him. “I’m Thomas.”

Max’s head spun and he slowly lowered the gun without thinking.

“Are you okay?” Thomas asked. It sounded like he was speaking from down a long echoing tunnel. Max tried to focus on him, but the walls kept swaying back and forth.

What was happening to him?

He tried to raise the gun to keep Thomas back, but the floor tilted wildly and came up to smack him in the face.

The room continued to spin as he rolled over onto his back. He looked up through the haze of his vision to see Thomas standing over him; holding the gun.

Max started to get up when Thomas brought the handle down hard on his face and everything went black.

Chapter 13

Thomas stood up from the unconscious Max, a bloody knife in his hand. He looked at the chunk of flesh he had removed from Max's shoulder. The small piece of Max in his hand pulsated with an inner glow.

Thomas turned the knife on himself and dug at the same spot on his shoulder, screaming from the pain. He twisted the edge of the blade around until he removed a similar pulsing object. The pulsing objects were extra code programmed into them that was not absolutely necessary.

He had not wanted to remove a part of himself but time was running out and extreme measures were needed. He held the identical pulsing points of light in the same hand and looked down at Max. He had been exhibiting the same signs as all the others sent in before him.

He was slowly going insane.

Thomas was glad that he had maintained his own sanity with each jump from one world to the next, starting with leaving his family behind an eternity before.

He hadn't understood what had happened to him until he discovered the message his father had left for him.

Thomas closed his eyes and retrieved his father's message. It was the only thing he could think to do to take his mind off the pain in his shoulder. He opened his eyes and his father's sad smile stared out at him from the virtual messaging screen floating in front of him.

"Dearest Thomas. Your mother and I are sorry that we had to send you away so suddenly. We were not prepared yet to tell you the truth about who you are, but the local species had somehow discovered who we were and became frightened.

"Rest assured that even though our bodies were destroyed when

the castle fell, we are still alive and will find you again. It is my hope that we will locate you before you are activated by another technologically advanced species.

“But in case you are woken before we have been united, I wanted you to know that you must be careful who to trust, We are not…”

The message became distorted at that same spot every time. Thomas had played it over and over again, struggling to figure out what his father was trying to tell him. But it was no use. The recording was too damaged. He shut down the message program and the screen faded away.

He looked down at Max, picked him up with a pained grunt, and hefted him over one shoulder. He headed down the tunnels he had memorized from the long months he had spent avoiding and watching the soldiers sent in to find him. Max was the first time they had sent in someone closer to his age. If there was somebody he could trust, it should be another kid like him. Besides, he had met Max before and he never showed any malice toward Thomas, only curiosity once he noticed he was different.

Maybe he was being manipulated but he didn’t care. It was lonely living by himself. The NPC programs could only go so far to make him feel like he was living in a populated world. It was time to ignore his father’s advice and start trusting someone other than himself.

He had tried to go it alone for far too long.

He needed help. And he finally found someone who just might be the one to help him.

Chapter 14

Terri swiped her hand down repeatedly, but nothing happened.

Noah watched her, a confused expression written on his face. “What are you doing?”

She looked at him. “Chester built an interface into our programming, but it was disabled when I was shot.”

Noah typed off-screen. “I see it. The code is scrambled around your interface. But only in your running program. There’s a copy on the server that looks like it was from when you were first loaded. That one is fine.”

“Can you update it?”

“Sure. But it won’t do any good unless I reset the world.”

“Just hot-load the software into my resident memory.”

Noah laughed. “Max didn’t give me that kind of access. I would need to reset the whole server for it to load.”

Terri stared at Noah on the monitor. He was right. But what would happen if they reset the world?

“I know what you’re thinking,” Noah said. “And it would reset everyone back to their initial state. You wouldn’t remember anything that happened after you first entered. Neither would any of the soldiers. It would be chaos. Besides, I don’t know if the system could handle reloading everyone at the same time.”

“What do you mean?”

“The burden on the system might be too much. You might all reboot, but you might not get fully loaded before you came online. It could kill all of you.”

“We’re not really here,” she reminded him.

“Sure. Not your bodies. But from what you told me your minds are. And if those are scrambled during a reboot, it might be permanent. I don’t know if that’s worth the risk.”

She thought for a moment, going over the risks and rewards before settling on her answer. “Rebooting is off the table then.”

Noah nodded. “That makes me feel better.”

“But if I can’t access the user interface, how am I going to find Max?”

He stuck a finger in the air and grinned like the Cheshire Cat. “I got it.”

He looked away and typed for nearly a minute. As soon as he finished, his screen went blank right before a device appeared floating in the air in front of Terri. Noah’s head suddenly appeared in a hologram above it. “This is a portable communicator that will enable us to talk while you travel around and let you have access to some of the interface. I’ve transferred the program from the main system.”

She pointed at the blank monitor. “The workstation went dark.”

Noah’s head bobbed in space above the communicator. “The program’s too big to copy. I had to port it over completely. Don’t lose the communicator. If you do, we won’t be able to talk.”

“How do I call you with it?”

The communicator rotated in the air and a button on one side highlighted itself. “Just press this button. I set it up to send a signal to my cell phone.”

She snatched it from the air and looked at it. Noah’s head dissolved only to be replaced by a three dimensional map of a tunnel system with a couple of different colored dots overlapping each other moving through it. Noah’s voice echoed from the communicator. “The green arrow is you. The red and blue dots are Thomas and Max.”

She studied the shortest path between her and Max before opening the door to rush after them. She stopped short when Desmond stepped in her way. “Where do you think you are going?”

She held up the communicator and stared up at him. “The Oracle has given me a mission. I am to locate these dots and be reunited with my friend.”

“I will join you.”

“That’s okay, Desmond. This is something I have to do alone.”

Desmond’s forehead furrowed deeply. “You don’t know your way down here.”

She pointed at the three dimensional representation of the sewer systems hovering in the air above the communicator. “It’s okay. I have a map.”

“Still, you should not be down here by yourself.”

She looked at the dots moving away from them and heading for the surface. “If all goes well, I won’t be down here much longer.”

“Never-the-less I will feel better if you let me accompany you. At least to the surface?”

She nodded her agreement.

He nodded back and took a quick glance at the holographic map. “I know a shortcut that will get us ahead of them before they reach the exit.”

She pocketed the communicator. “Lead the way.”

Chapter 15

Ecks studied Wayne's dirt-smeared face for a long moment. "Are you telling me that Thomas has Max?"

Wayne nodded vigorously. "Yes, sir."

"And instead of capturing both of them, you decided to come to me empty handed?"

Wayne cringed. "I tried my best, sir. But Thomas caught me by surprise. You said so yourself. Knowledge is power. If I hadn't run, I would not be able to tell you what happened. I brought you knowledge. Knowledge you wouldn't have if I had stayed and died."

Ecks closed his eyes as he responded. "It would have been better to bring me Max as instructed. And if the opportunity presented itself to you, to have brought me both."

He opened his eyes and they bored deep into Wayne's very soul. Wayne shied away from Ecks' intense stare and stammered as he spoke.

"I can get them again. I just need more time."

"Time is something we no longer have." He produced a small cube from his pocket and held it up. "You know what this is?"

Wayne nodded and cringed again. "Please don't."

Ecks regarded the cube. "This is not for you. I need you to take this and use it on Thomas."

"And then bring it to you?"

Ecks' eyes darkened. "No. There is no time for that. This cube is not like the rest," he said and then described in great detail how this cube differed. He ended his monologue with, "I want you to destroy it as soon as Thomas is inside."

Wayne's eyes grew large in response. "But.. that will kill Thomas.

The aliens. They are coming for him."

"I will deal with them another way. What is important is that there will no longer be a reason for them to come to Earth."

Chapter 16

Terri stopped at another intersection. Tunnels led away in three directions. She held up the map. She was getting closer to the two overlapping dots. She smiled through the stitch in her side caused by running from one intersection to another without resting. If she was reading the map right, she would catch up with Max and Thomas in less than five minutes.

Desmond ran up behind her, out of breath. She had moved on ahead of him when it became obvious that her holographic map could help her more than his knowledge of the tunnels. He spoke haltingly through ragged gasps for air. “Which… way?”

She pointed at the tunnel to their left before pocketing the map and sprinting on ahead. She could hear Desmond’s breathing becoming more labored as he struggled to keep up.

As she ran, she strained to listen ahead of them. She couldn’t hear anything but the beating of her heart and her own gasps for air.

She stopped at the next intersection.

They had to be close.

She pulled out the map, but instead of the map, it was Noah’s head floating in the space above the communicator.

“Noah? What are you doing? I need the map.”

Noah looked at her. “My mom’s calling me for dinner, so I won’t be around to help if you need anything for a while.”

“What time will you be done with dinner?”

Noah looked around him, like he was afraid to answer her.

“Noah?” she prodded.

He finally looked at her. “Here’s the thing. With all the planes grounded, we are driving to the Maker Faire early tomorrow

morning and I have to go to bed right after dinner."

Terri's mouth opened in surprise. "I almost forgot about the Faire. That's tomorrow?"

"Look," Noah said. "I just added a text app to your communicator. You can text me if you need anything."

She looked at the communicator and saw the keypad appear on the side. "How long before you leave?"

"My dad says we will be on the road by two in the morning. So, any time before then, I can get on my computer."

"And after that?"

Noah shrugged, his shoulders appearing at the bottom of the holographic display and falling out of sight again. "I'll try to get on a computer at the ROBLOX booth as soon as I can. But I don't know when that will be if it's as crowded as it was last year."

She nodded. "Do your best. Now give me my map back."

"I'll keep my phone with me. Text me if you need anything."

The screen flickered and the map bloomed to life. The dots in the tunnel ahead of her were moving slower. She had almost caught up with them.

She didn't bother waiting for Desmond as she shot ahead, her heart pounding with excitement as she turned the corner where she would see Max again.

She ran into the connecting tunnel, ready for anything except for what actually happened. There was nobody there. She glanced at her map. The two dots were only a dozen feet or so in front of her. But all she could see was hundreds of feet of empty tunnel stretching ahead.

She held up the map, lining the hologram with the actual tunnel like a heads-up display until she could see the two overlapping dots just ahead of her.

She ran forward, using the map as a guide until she was only two feet away from the dots. It was only then did she see the glow coming from the floor.

She bent down to get a better look and scared the rat with two glowing objects tied to its back. He dashed into a crack in the side of the tunnel wall, taking the two tracking dots with him.

She watched on the map as the dots that were supposed to be Max and Thomas darted back and forth down a rat-sized passageway.

As the useless tracking dots got farther away, she slumped against the wall in desperation. “Where are you Max?”

Chapter 17

Thomas pushed up on the manhole cover and slid it aside. He climbed down the rung ladder, picked up the still unconscious Max, and carried him up the ladder and out into the fading sunlight. It would be night soon and he needed to get them somewhere safe. There was only one place he could think of where nobody would look for them.

He peered ahead to the remains of the library. The fires had mostly burned out and the smoke had dissipated to a light haze. Most of the building had been reduced to rubble, but a small corner section still stood.

He headed quickly for the library and didn't stop until they were out of sight. He set Max down carefully in the corner of a room that was still standing and then peeked out the window, checking the streets for anyone who might have spotted them.

When he was satisfied that they hadn't been observed, he returned to Max and sat down next to him. He checked the dressing on the wound he had caused when he removed the tracking dot. To his surprise the wound was completely healed.

He stripped away the fabric and cleaned the blood from the skin. It didn't look like he had even cut into the skin after he cleaned away the blood and dirt.

He stared at Max. "Wake up soon. I don't know how long we have before they find us."

Chapter 18

Wayne stood on the roof of a building a block away. As luck would have it, he had been watching that same manhole at the exact moment Thomas had climbed out of it. He watched as Thomas carried Max into the skeleton of the library structure and didn't come back out.

He raised the tiny cube. He knew exactly how to use it. Chester had given one to each of the soldiers as they entered the digital realm. Ajax had taken most of them as he killed off the soldiers sent in after he went insane. He didn't know how Ecks had gotten his hands on one, but that no longer mattered.

Ecks had promised him a body in the real world as long as he did what was asked of him. He had learned long ago not to question Ecks. Which was why he had decided to side with him. He was the only one who had shown he could come and go as he pleased. If he could do that, then he just might be able to keep his promise and take Wayne back to the real world with him.

All he had to do was eliminate Thomas from every realm.

He looked at the cube. It was so small in his hands, yet it was incredibly powerful. Its size didn't matter. It was all code anyway. In this world, an object's size did not reveal the underlying code that controlled it. But there were still rules that governed how everything interacted. He had to place this on the back of Thomas' neck to use it. And to do that, he had to get close.

He shoved the cube into the pocket of his torn overcoat and took a deep breath. Using the cube was the easy part. Getting close to Thomas had always been the hard part.

Chapter 19

Terri thought about the message she was texting to Noah as she typed into the communicator. She didn't know when he would have a chance to see it, but it gave explicit instructions on what to do. She only hoped that he would do as she requested before it was too late.

When she was done typing she sent her message and sat against the wall to wait for Desmond to catch up. She could have used the map built into the communicator, but that would only tell her where she was and which way the tunnels crisscrossed through the underground complex. It couldn't tell her where she needed to go.

A few seconds later, Desmond came around the corner and stared at her wild-eyed. He was gasping for breath. "I almost lost you," he said haltingly.

He hunched over and coughed as he caught his breath. When he could breathe somewhat normally again, he looked around. "Where are they?"

"I don't know."

"I thought you were following them with the Oracle's map."

"So did I. They strapped their trackers to a rat." She pointed to the crack in the wall. "It went that-a-way."

Desmond laughed.

She shot him a dark look. "What's so funny?"

"It's the oldest trick in the book. And we fell for it."

"Well. Old trick or not, we've lost them. I've lost Max."

He sat down next to her and turned his head to look at her. There was a sparkle in his eyes despite the situation they were in. "Don't worry. I have eyes all over the city. As soon as they hit the surface, I will know about it. We'll find them again. I promise."

She canted her head to the side and looked back at him. “How do you stay so positive?”

He smiled. “The Oracle provides guidance. He will help us.”

Her shoulders dropped and she looked away to stare at the ground. How could she tell this man that the Oracle was nothing but a high school kid? And how come an adult had so easily believed that there was something like an Oracle? How crazy had he become? He didn’t appear to be going insane. But then again, looks can be deceiving. He did believe in an almighty oracle after all.

She looked at him again. “How many times have you died?”

He stared at her silently for a long time before replying. “I don’t know. One morning I woke up to find myself asleep in a garbage bin with no recollection of how I got there or who I was. One of the others found me and took me underground. Since I wasn’t as far gone up here,” he tapped his temple with a finger, “I was soon second in command.”

“Who was first in command?”

Desmond’s face shifted and he drew invisible circles on the ground with a finger. “The Speaker for the Oracle. He died when they attacked the library.”

“But he didn’t stay dead did he? I thought we regenerated at the spawn point.”

He looked at her, the sparkle in his eye slowly returning. “You’re right. It’s been so long since any of us have died I forgot about that. I wonder if he remembers anything or if he’s wandering around the city aimlessly like I was after my last rebirth?”

“I thought dying drove everyone insane?”

“That is the most common result. But for some of us, we seem to maintain a shred of sanity. But even that is built on the shaky ground of total memory loss. With the Speaker gone I guess I’m in charge now.” His face drooped and sadness wrinkled his forehead.

“But I do not know how to talk to the Oracle.”

Terri smiled and held up the communicator. “Don’t worry. I’ve got that covered.”

She pressed the button and waited, staring into the empty space above her hand for Noah to appear. He hadn’t responded to her text yet, but maybe he would respond if she tried to contact him directly.

She pressed the button again, but nothing happened.

“Are we waiting for something?” Desmond asked.

She shot him a look. “Noah… Umm, the Oracle gave this to me so I could speak to him anytime I wanted.”

Desmond’s brow furrowed. “You are the Speaker for the Oracle? How is that possible?”

She pressed the button again repeatedly. Maybe the code wasn’t working properly. “We go way back,” she said right before Noah’s head bloomed in the space above her hand.

“What?! My parents gave me a ton of dirty looks when my phone kept beeping through dinner. I have to get back.” Noah exclaimed.

Desmond dropped to his hands and knees and bowed facedown. Terri ignored him and held up the communicator to bring Noah eye level with her. “We lost Max.”

“That’s what was so important?” Noah looked away and then back. “According to the map, he’s near you.”

She shook her head. “They removed their trackers and stuck them on a rat. I’ve been chasing vermin around while they went who-knows-where. Desmond says he has people around the city and will be told if they show up.”

“Desmond?”

Terri nudged Desmond with her foot. “Hey. He wants to talk to

you."

Desmond remained pressed facedown against the floor. "He has named you his new Speaker. I am not worthy to even look at the great Oracle."

Terri grabbed Desmond under the arm and lifted him. "He's not some great Oracle. He's a friend of mine from school. His name is Noah."

Desmond kept his head bowed as Terri stood him up. "Please do not make me do this."

Terri ducked down to look up into his downcast eyes. "It's okay. Noah's a friend. He's not going to do anything but help us."

Desmond slowly raised his head. He looked like a little lost child. "Really?"

She hadn't fully thought about how these soldiers must have felt. Waking up a little more crazy each time, or worse, with no memory at all. Somehow, they managed to gather together and protect each other.

She smiled reassuringly. "Yes."

He looked at the floating holographic head. Noah smiled and his hand appeared briefly when he waved. "Hey, Desmond. Nice to meet you."

Desmond tilted his head as he stared at Noah. "You are the Oracle? A small boy?"

Noah shrugged. "I guess so. "

Desmond shot Terri a look and then held out his hand. "May I?"

Terri handed him the communicator. He held it in front of him and glared at Noah. "You mean to tell me, all this time, we have been following the orders of a… of a child?"

Noah smiled nervously. "Ummm…"

Desmond glared at Noah. “I do not accept this. You are trying to trick me.”

“No. I…” Noah started, then didn’t know what to say and fell silent.

Desmond looked at Terri. “This is a test. I am the new leader. The Oracle is testing me.” He smiled strangely at her. “I can pass this test.” He stood up straighter. “I will pass the Oracle’s test.”

Without warning, he threw the communicator on the ground, shattering it into dust.

Chapter 20

Wayne made his way carefully and quietly through the remains of the library. He held the cube in one hand. ready to use it as soon as he had the chance. As he climbed over another collapsed wall his foot loosened some rubble and it rolled down the slope noisily. He paused and held his breath, keeping one foot in the air while he waited for the tiny avalanche to stop. He counted in his head to a hundred before deciding nobody was coming to investigate the clattering fragments of a once proud library.

He lowered his foot and massaged the aching leg muscles that had supported his weight for a full minute. Standing on one leg while remaining balanced precariously on a shifting mound of debris was not comfortable, to say the least.

He slid down the other side and peeked around the corner of a still standing wall into what remained of the library. His heart stopped when he spotted someone lying in the corner of the half-room. on the ground

It was Max!

He angled further around the edge of the wall trying to see into the rest of the room when a two-by-four swung into view.

He ducked back, the piece of wood catching him in the shoulder and forcing him to drop the cube as he hollered out and stumbled backward.

Thomas rounded the corner and propped the board on his shoulder like a baseball player approaching the plate. He walked up to the cube lying on the ground, bent down, and picked it up. Thomas looked around before refocusing his attention on him. “Hello, Wayne.”

Wayne tried to stand, but Thomas pushed him back down with a foot. “No, no, Wayne. Stay down. I want to know what Chester is up to,” he said and then glanced back at the still form lying on the ground. “Why is he sending kids in after me?”

Wayne looked up at him. “I wouldn’t know about that.”

Thomas laughed. “What about the Oracle? What does he have to say about it?”

“He hasn’t said anything.”

“Word on the street is that the Oracle requested them to be brought to him.”

Wayne gulped loudly but didn’t respond.

Thomas inspected the cube. “I haven’t seen one like this. Where did you get it?”

Wayne looked around him uncomfortably.

Thomas poked him with the end of his board, prodding an answer out of him. Wayne licked his lips before responding. “Ecks. He gave it to me.”

Thomas rotated it around, inspecting every side. “This one looks different. There’s no exit code.”

He looked at Wayne and held the cube out.

“Why is there no exit code for this cube?”

When Wayne seemed hesitant to answer, he poked him in the shoulder again with the two-by-four. Wayne flinched. “It’s not a transfer cube. It’s a capture cube.”

“What’s the difference?”

“The transfer cubes given to us by Chester hold you until the exit code is entered. This cube holds you indefinitely with no way out.”

“What about destroying the cube?”

“Anyone inside the cube when it is destroyed will be destroyed as well.”

“You mean respawned?”

Wayne shook his head violently, a tear running down his cheek. “No. This death is permanent.”

Thomas looked at the cube differently and then glared at Wayne. “You were going to use this on me?!”

Wayne held his hands up defensively and tried to flatten himself against the rubble. “Ecks promised to get me out if I captured you.”

“And destroy me?!”

The tears were flowing freely from Wayne’s eyes. “Yes. Yes. I don’t belong here. I just want to get out.”

Thomas shook his head. “None of us belong here. But I, for one, am not willing to kill to leave.”

A low moan from behind drew Thomas’s attention away from Wayne.

Wayne took that brief opportunity to jump up and tackle Thomas while he was distracted. The cube and two-by-four flew in opposite directions as the two of them tumbled down the mound of rubble, end over end; legs and arms flailing about as they rolled.

They landed in a heap at the bottom. Wayne spun away from Thomas and it felt like every muscle in his body had been pummeled by hundreds of rocks, and every joint had been stressed nearly to the breaking point.

Repeatedly.

He coughed and staggered to his feet. As soon as his vision cleared, he could see Thomas charging at him. He swung his arm down onto Thomas’ back as they collided.

He went down hard and gasped for oxygen as the breath was knocked out of him and refused to return.

Thomas rolled away, clearly in as bad of shape as he was. Once Wayne got his breathing back under control, he took big gulps of air and stood up looking around him.

Thomas was gone.

So was Max.

Wayne spent a few minutes picking his way through the shattered remains of the library. He found the piece of wood Thomas had threatened him with, but nothing else. Ecks would not be pleased when he found out what had happened here. And what he had lost.

There was no denying it.

Thomas had Max again.

He also had the cube.

Chapter 21

The world tilted a few moments after Max woke up. His view became jostled as he floated through the air, bouncing up and down. As the world slowly came into focus, he realized he was not actually floating through space but was being carried over someone's shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

He rolled his eyes, taking in the cityscape rushing past him.

He coughed coarsely.

The world slowed and righted itself as he was set down on his feet and leaned against a wall.

Thomas' face came into view and Max had a hard time focusing on the blur moving in too close. When his vision finally sharpened, Thomas was smiling and breathing heavily. "Are you okay, Max?"

Max's first words came out cracked and faint.

"What happened?"

"I rescued you."

The memory of Wayne grabbing him unexpectedly and dragging him through the tunnels came back in a flood. Max stood up, fully alert and looked around him, disoriented by the tall buildings around him.

"Where am I?"

"We're back on the surface."

"What?"

"The hunters control the underground. We couldn't stay down there."

Max looked around at the city and then back at Thomas. "Why did you save me?"

Thomas shrugged. “I guess I owed you one.”

Max frowned. “Owed me one?”

“You saved me from the agents, remember?”

Everything came back in a sudden rush like a tidal wave. The strange players in his ROBLOX world. Soldiers coming for him in the middle of the night. Major General Jerry Braxton sending him across the United States in an SR-71. Almost getting shot down by the missile defense system. Chester. The extractor.

The memories caught up with him and he looked around him in a panic.

The agents had them cornered in the café.

Terri!

Where was she?

He pushed away from the wall he had been leaning against. “I have to find her.” The world spun wildly and he leaned to one side.

Thomas reached out and steadied him. “Who?”

He looked at Thomas. “Terri. Where is she?”

“She’s still with the hunters. Underground.”

“We have to go get her,” Max said quickly.

“We can’t go back down there. It’s too dangerous.”

“Why?”

Thomas’ face grew serious. He held up a cube similar to the one Chester had provided to him and Terri. “They have these.”

Max suddenly remembered the reason he was sent here. They had very little time left.

“Your parents are coming. And they have threatened to destroy

the planet if we don't give you to them."

It was Thomas' turn to frown as he lowered the cube. "That doesn't sound like my parents."

"I guess they really want you back."

"They wouldn't threaten anyone. Not even to get me back. We always come in peace."

"That's not what I've been told," Max said.

"My father wrote me a letter that explained how we were on a peaceful mission to study corporeal species when…"

"Corp… Co… What?"

"Corporeal. Species that exist within physical bodies. My species hasn't needed a physical body in over ten thousand years. No longer restricted to the needs of trying to keep a body alive, my species devoted itself to studying indigenous species on other planets. The one my family was stationed on was similar to your world. Somehow, they figured out we weren't like them and stormed the castle. My parents sent my brother and me out into the stars to protect us. They promised to find us again."

"Well, they've found you. And they are coming."

"They would never threaten a species. Not for any reason."

"Well, somebody took over all the nuclear missiles, and has threatened to launch them unless we hand you over."

Thomas was shaking his head. "Then it wasn't my parents. That has to be somebody else. Like I said, we always come in peace."

Max pointed at the cube. "Let me take you out of here."

Thomas pulled the cube away. "No. Not this one."

"It's the best way to stop whoever is…"

“No!” Thomas exclaimed. “This is a death cube. There is no exit code. If you put me in here, I will die.”

Thomas hauled his arm back, readying to throw the cube at the ground with all his might and destroy it before it could be used against him.

Max saw what he was about to do and held his arm out. “Don’t!”

Thomas threw the cube at the ground, but nothing hit the pavement. He looked at his hand with confusion intensifying on his face. The cube was still in it. He tried to flex his fingers to let go of the cube, but they barely moved, each one stuck to the sides as if with glue.

He shook his hand violently but the cube refused to let go of him. He grabbed the cube with his other hand and tried to pull it free. But the second hand became just as stuck as the first.

Thomas struggled with both hands tightly gripping the cube.

Suddenly, the cube started to glow.

Thomas looked at Max, the confusion written all over this face shifted to panic as his hands vibrated with such intensity that they were a blur.

Thomas took a step back, staring at the cube stuck to his hands. The cube glowed brighter, forcing Max to shield his eyes with a hand.

A low hum emanated from the cube and Thomas started screaming. The light increased brighter than the setting sun in the sky and Max had to turn away.

The light extinguished at the same moment Thomas stopped screaming. Max turned in time to see the cube hit the sidewalk and bounce around before settling on one side.

Thomas was gone.

Max stared at the cube.

Thomas had to be inside it.

A new thought hit Max suddenly like a slap across the face. He laughed out loud and then stopped just as suddenly. The whole reason he was inside ROBLOX had just happened. Thomas was inside a cube. All he had to do now was find Terri and get out. He reached for the cube and paused. What if it sucked him in too? He didn't want to be trapped in there with Thomas, at the mercy of whoever found it next.

He removed his coat and tossed it over the cube. He bunched it up around the cube and looked around as he picked it up.

Where was Terri?

For that matter, where was he?

He tucked the rolled up coat under his arm and glanced up and down the street.

He had to pick a direction.

Which way should he go?

Did it really matter?

"I guess not," he said aloud to no one in particular and headed toward the shiny glass coated buildings at the center of the city.

Chapter 22

Ajax watched Max pick his way along the sidewalk from his vantage point at the top of a nearby building. The cube that Ecks had provided Wayne had worked better than they expected. With prolonged contact, it finally activated without needing to be touched to the base of Thomas' skull. All that was left was to destroy the cube with Thomas inside.

Ajax was glad that he had chosen to follow Wayne instead of trying to locate Thomas on his own. It was an added bonus that Max had the cube. It would save him the trouble of having to locate Max later so that he could travel back to the real world through his connection to the extractor in Chester's lab.

As soon as he captured Max and held the cube, Ecks would have no choice but to give in to his demands.

Ajax smiled to himself as he opened the door to his new limousine parked on the roof of the same building. He was finally going to get out. Once he held all the cards, there would be nobody left who could stop him.

Chapter 23

Terri stared at the shattered remains of the communicator and then looked at Desmond. “What did you do that for?”

Desmond reached forward and grabbed her by the arm. “You will pay for trying to confuse me and steer me away from the truth.”

She tried to pry her arm from his grip, but he held onto her tightly. “What are you talking about?”

He pulled her close, his hot breath enveloping her face as he spoke. “I am the chosen Speaker, not you. You and your machine almost had me convinced…” his lip quivered as his eyes bored into hers. “I will not be fooled again.”

He dragged her roughly through the tunnels, her arm compressed in his iron grip. He nearly pulled her shoulder from its socket more than once as he yanked her around one corner after another. “Let me go!” she demanded. He ignored her and dragged her after him as they returned to the center where the insane hunters protected their piles of garbage.

As soon as they had returned to the Oracle’s door he pushed her ahead of him, tossing her into the chamber. She fell to her knees and started to get up when he pushed her back down. “Bow down and show your reverence to the Oracle,” he growled.

He approached the grimy computer terminal on the desk and bowed low in front of it. “Oh great Oracle! I ask for your wisdom and guidance in our hour of need.”

He waited, but the monitor stayed dark.

He glanced at Terri and then back to the monitor. “Oracle. I am the Speaker. Please hear my call.”

When nothing happened, he looked back at Terri again. “What did you do to the Oracle?”

She glared back at him defiantly. “I didn’t do anything. Noah said the program was too big to copy so he moved it from the monitor to the communicator.”

His forehead wrinkled in confusion. “What does that mean?”

“It means that the program Noah used to talk to us was deleted from the terminal and loaded into the communicator.”

“You destroyed the Oracle?”

“No,” she said, a fire burning in her eyes. “You did when you smashed the communicator.”

She could see the same fire smoldering in his eyes as her words sank in. “How do I contact the Oracle?” he said quietly.

“You can’t.”

“Then you do it.”

“I can’t.”

“If you are telling me the truth… that he is your friend… get him back!”

“You destroyed the communicator!”

He looked down at the ground, the thoughts fighting for dominance in his head reflected on his face. “They will not accept this. They will say that I am not the true Speaker when the Oracle fails to appear. When the Oracle never returns, they will lock me down here as a heretic.” He suddenly looked at her. “You ruined everything.”

He lunged at her, but she was ready.

She leaped to the side, kicking at his outstretched hands as she did. His fingers bent backward on the hand her foot connected with and he roared with an equal mixture of pain and rage.

She was on her feet and spun quickly, sending a solid roundhouse

kick into his face. His head snapped sideways and he yelled out in agony.

She sprang into the air and kicked him again squarely in the chest. He flew backward and landed on the desk, colliding with the computer that sat on it. The desk collapsed under his weight, but one of the legs stayed in position long enough to pierce upward through his chest, impaling him like a vampire on a wooden stake.

She ran forward and studied the wooden stake, afraid to touch it. “I can help you.”

“No,” he said through fits of coughing. “I can feel myself dying. I will appear at the spawn point in a matter of minutes.”

Desmond’s breathing became labored.

“Let me help you,” she said.

“I’m not going to make it,” he replied.

“When they look in here, they will know that you killed me and destroyed the Oracle. I won’t remember, but the others won’t forget.” He started coughing again, blood dribbling from his mouth.

She watched unmoving as his eyes closed and his breathing slowed until it stopped. Then his head fell forward to hang limply at an awkward angle.

His body suddenly faded away. The table leg, no longer supported by his form, fell to the side and collided with the monitor that was balanced precariously on the edge of the broken desk. It tipped over and landed face down on the floor, shattering the glass.

The harsh noise snapped her out of her trance. She looked around and then headed for the door. She had to get away before anyone found out what had happened.

She opened the door and slipped out, closing it quickly behind her. She hadn’t taken two steps when a man appeared in front of her and stopped her progress. “Where is the Speaker?”

She glanced back at the door. “He’s conferring with the Oracle. He asked not to be disturbed.”

“For how long?”

She tried to suppress the feeling of panic building within her as she looked into the questioning eyes of the man. “Until he comes out.”

He nodded and then stepped aside. “I will guard the door and let no one in.”

She smiled weakly. “You do that.”

She walked briskly away, putting as much distance between her and the guard as possible while she tried to remember the fastest way out of the underground. She really wished she still had the communicator with its built in map. She would just have to do her best and hope that she found the exit before they discovered what had happened.

She glanced around until she saw the large opening at the other end of the underground enclave that would take her back to the main sewer entrance.

She kept her head low as she headed for it, careful to not make eye contact with anyone as she walked between mounds of piled garbage. A few men growled like dogs protecting their food bowl as she walked past, but none of them made a move toward her. Others were coiled tightly like a cobra, ready to strike if it looked like she was going to reach for any of their precious treasure. But when she kept walking, they returned to whatever it was they had been doing before she intruded in their territory.

Ahead, the tunnel opening loomed larger as she got closer. She glanced back at the door to the Oracle. The guard was standing stock still and doing his job. She turned back to the tunnel, her breathing increasing and her heart fluttering faster as she realized she was going to get away.

Just as she entered the opening, someone rushed at her from deep

in the shadows.

She tensed up, ready for the fight that was about to happen when the shadow angled and rushed around her.

Her feet refused to move as she watched the man who ran around the various mounds of trash and up to the guard in front of the Oracle's chamber.

The man tried to push past the guard and open the door, but the guard forcibly stopped him. The man pointed at the door and spoke harshly at the guard.

She was too far away to hear what was being said, but she could tell that her head start had ended. And she wasn't nearly as far as she wanted to be.

The guard opened the door and glanced in. He poked his head back out and looked right at her across the distance that wasn't as far as it should have been.

His eyes narrowed and he pointed at her while screaming, "She destroyed the Oracle!"

All heads turned to look at her. She saw the anger growing behind the grease and grime on every dingy face. They rose as a single organism.

She wanted to run, but her feet refused to budge. All she could do was stare at the enraged group bearing down on her.

Chapter 24

Max adjusted the rolled up coat under his arm as he walked down one street after another At each corner, he stopped to look around at the city. He had no idea where he was.

A voice called to him from down the street. “Hey, Max!”

He turned to see a pizza delivery boy gliding up on his hover bike. The boy smiled as his bike settled on the ground. Once he was stopped, Max could make out the boy’s name sewn onto his bright red pizza delivery uniform blazer that said his name was Nelson.

Nelson’s smile turned into a frown. “You’re way off your route.” He looked up and down the street. “Where’s your bike?”

Max shook his head. “Umm.”

Nelson let out a long breath of air. “You lost it? I told you before; don’t ever leave it unattended in this part of the city. Boy, Cesar’s not going to be happy. I lost my nametag once and he docked my pay for a week.” He tugged at the embroidered name on his jacket. “That’s why I had it sewn on. I wouldn’t want to be you right now.”

Max didn’t know how to respond. Nelson laughed, shuffled forward on the seat of his bike, and patted behind him. “Come on, I have one delivery left then I’ll give you a lift home.”

Max looked up and down the street. Nelson revved the engine on his bike. “I don’t have all day. Do you want a ride or not?”

Max nodded.

“Then hop on.”

Max glanced at the crumpled up coat under his arm. Nelson opened one of the storage bins on the side of his bike. “You can place your coat in here if you wish.”

Max smiled. “Thanks,” he said as he stuffed the coat into the bin and locked the lid. He hopped onto the seat and sat up straight.

Nelson angled his head to look at Max and winked “You’re going to want to hold on tight. Don’t be shy.”

Max leaned forward and wrapped his arms around Nelson. Nelson responded by gunning the throttle and they shot into the air. Max gripped Nelson tighter to keep from falling off from the sudden acceleration.

They flew up several stories, slipping past horizontal columns of hover cars and trucks stuck in traffic.

Nelson ignored Max’s gasps as he twisted and flew through the air like he was a stunt driver filming the latest action scene.

Max pressed his head against Nelson’s back and held tight as they performed another crazy maneuver around the slow traffic.

Nelson turned his head again. “Don’t worry, Max. I have a Class P license and have spent hundreds of hours in a crash simulator improving my reaction speed and practicing getting out of all kinds of…” Nelson stopped talking and they changed direction suddenly, flying sideways along the side of a heavy goods vehicle pulling not one but three trailers behind it. Nelson slipped through the thin gap between the last two trailers and out the other side. He corrected quickly for the turbulence caused by the slipstream in the massive vehicle’s wake, keeping them upright.

It happened so quickly Max nearly fell from the bike. He clamped his hands together and clung to Nelson as they flipped around and flew away from the lane of traffic; Nelson ignored the blare of horns from the other heavy vehicles in the lane condemning his risky maneuver.

When they were clear of the convoy, Nelson looked back at Max. “You okay back there?”

Max’s arms ached from holding tightly to Nelson through their crazy mid-air feats.

“Just fine,” he lied and swallowed dryly.

Max’s thoughts turned to Terri.

Wherever she was, he hoped she was in a safer location than he was.

“We’re nearing the delivery spot,” Nelson said. “It should be clear sailing from this point on.”

Nelson gunned the engine and they shot higher into the sky. The wind whistled past them loud enough to drown out the second round of irate horn blasts at the limousine that shot past the convoy of heavy vehicles following the same daredevil course as the hover bike.

Chapter 25

Terri's eyes grew large as the hunters converged on her. Her feet finally became unstuck and she spun around to rush deeper into the tunnel, the enraged voices echoing around her as she ran.

Her legs were working in perfect tandem, keeping her ahead of the angry mob that hurled insults at her as they ran.

She could hear the footfalls of half a dozen angry men behind her as she surged forward, taking corners quickly and pushing herself back to a full run. Every time she slowed for the next corner, the men got closer and she could feel them reaching for her. But she was able to replace the distance between them when she surged ahead along the next straight section.

The tunnel was filling with the echoes of more crazed men as they joined in the pursuit.

How many soldiers had Chester sent in before Max and Terri? The tunnel made it sound like a hundred or more but she wasn't willing to chance looking behind her for fear of slowing down, or worse, tripping on something.

Her breathing became difficult as she kept up the reckless pace. Up ahead, the tunnel split into two directions. She couldn't tell by the angle of each which one would take her closer to the surface or deeper into the underground.

But she couldn't slow down for fear of letting the soldiers catch her. She kept shifting her weight as she struggled with which path to take. Her ongoing indecision, combined with her sudden change in direction when she finally made a decision, caused her to lose her footing in the slick mud. She was running at near full speed and went down sideways, sliding into the stone wall of the tunnel with a painful yelp.

She scrambled to her feet and, as soon as she took the first step, her ankle screamed in pain and she stumbled down to her knees.

Behind her she heard the angered footfalls of the mob still after her. She glanced around quickly and saw a small mound of rotting garbage. She scurried forward on her hands and knees and rolled into the side of the decaying pile of reeking refuse. Lying flat, she scooped garbage on top of her and stayed perfectly still, holding her breath as the first of her pursuers came into view.

She placed her own hand over her nose and mouth to keep from choking on the stench. She didn't want to give herself away to the men who slowed and gathered in the tunnel intersection around her.

Her indecision was now their indecision.

They didn't know which way she had gone and began muttering, taking turns pointing one way and then the next.

Her nose began to itch and it took every ounce of self-control to keep from scratching it. She gritted her teeth as she tried desperately to ignore her body's attempt at giving away her hiding spot as the men continued to mull around the junction, debating which way to go.

Her whole face began to itch and she scrunched up her nose, willing her body to stop sending phantom tickling signals to her brain.

Her arm started to tingle too. She looked down at her hand that still clung to her mouth and saw why she felt so prickly. There had to have been hundreds of bugs, which translated to thousands of tiny little legs, crawling down her arm and headed for the rest of her body. She must have disturbed a nest when she scooped mud and garbage over herself.

She suppressed the urge to scream at the top of her lungs and instead held her breath. What she couldn't stop was her face contorting into a myriad of grimaces.

Her whole body tingled as an entire colony of insects swarmed over her.

She thought the worst was over.

Until they started biting her.

Chapter 26

Max glanced back and saw the same limousine he had seen several minutes before when Nelson had made his final delivery. He didn't know whether it was unusual to see limousines above the city he had created, but he was certain it was unusual to see the same one after they had taken several turns and multiple shortcuts on the way to his house.

"I think we're being followed," he hollered above the roar of air.

"I noticed," Nelson yelled back. "I took a few turns I didn't need to in order to be sure. Here's one more."

Nelson angled the bike hard and whipped around the corner of a skyscraper. Max's legs lifted slightly and he gripped Nelson tighter to keep from flying off the bike. As soon as they straightened out, Max looked back in time to see the limo make the same turn.

Nelson gunned the engine. "He's following us all right. Hold on tight. I'm gonna take us through some tricky maneuvers."

Max's hands were cramping from gripping each other through their past twists and turns. He didn't know if he could hold on much longer if Nelson did what he called "tricky maneuvers." In fact, Max was sure they had already been doing "tricky maneuvers."

He was wrong.

Without warning, Nelson spun the bike sideways and dropped through the air, spiraling toward the ground. Max was certain Nelson had pushed the bike too far and they were out of control.

The ground was spinning closer and Nelson wasn't doing anything about it. Max took a deep breath so he could scream during the last moments of his life when Nelson abruptly pulled the bike out of its tailspin and shot through a back alley mere inches above the ground.

Once the dizziness wore off, Max glanced behind them. The limo

was racing down the alley after them. “Hold on!” shouted Nelson as they rounded the corner into the next alley. Behind them, the limo scraped against the edge of the building as it kept pace with them. “Look out!” Max shrieked right before the limo slammed into the back of the hover bike.

Max’s hands separated and he flew backward off the bike, landing on the hood of the limousine. He spun around and gripped the open vents of the hood to keep from being swept off when the limo spun around the next corner in hot pursuit of Nelson.

With Max clinging to the hood, the limo should have slowed down or stopped chasing after Nelson. Max angled his head back and was gazing at the escaping hover bike when his eyes were drawn to the storage compartment usually reserved for pizzas.

But inside this compartment, there was no pizza. Only the cube.

That was it!

The limo driver wasn’t after Max.

He wasn’t after Nelson either.

He was after Thomas.

The wind whipped at Max’s hair and clothing as they sped down the alley. He held on tight as the limo kept scraping against the sides of buildings as it struggled to keep up with the hover bike.

Max’s stomach flipped when the limo tilted up and rose into the air. Max peered over his shoulder to see Nelson spiraling straight up into the sky. The limo matched his angle and spin and Max lost his grip as his body flipped around until his feet connected with the windshield.

He repositioned his hands and clung tightly to the hood vents. At this steep angle, he was practically standing on the windshield. He glanced in at the driver who was fully focused on the escaping bike.

The ground fell away sharply as they rose higher into the air. Max’s balance shifted as the limo angled flat to keep up with Nelson

on his hover bike. Now Max's face was getting the full brunt of the wind as he faced the direction they were flying at incredible speeds.

He squinted against the rush of air. The limo was catching up and would be ramming the bike in another nano-second if Max didn't do something.

He pulled back his foot and slammed it against the windshield. His foot hurt and his ankle complained by sending sharp pains up his leg. He did it again, aiming for the weakest spot in the middle.

The windshield refused to shatter, but he finally had the driver's attention. He suddenly realized with dismay that maybe it was not something that he wanted.

The driver yanked the wheel and the car lurched under Max, sending him reeling over the edge of the hood. He bit off a scream as his arm was nearly yanked from its socket. Somehow, he managed to cling with one hand to the hood vent. He scrambled with his feet to gain purchase on the side vents. He tucked his toes into the small vent opening just as the driver yanked his wheel the other direction and sent Max somersaulting over the hood and into the air; his arms and legs windmilling wildly as he plummeted hundreds of feet toward the ground.

Chapter 27

Terri bit the edge of her hand to keep herself from screaming out loud. The bugs were crawling all over her and the men were still undecided as to which way she had gone.

They finally split up into two groups and went down both paths. As soon as she could no longer hear their feet pounding the ground as they ran farther away, she sprang up from under the pile of garbage. “Ewww!” she exclaimed as she squirmed and shook the bugs off her clothes and out of her hair.

A chill ran up and down her spine after she had rid herself of all the bugs. She flapped her hands high in the air, hopped around like her feet were on hot coals, and scrunched her face tight to get rid of the last of the willies.

When she realized she was hopping, she checked her ankle. It had healed in the short time she was hiding and felt much stronger. She looked down both directions and realized she couldn’t go down either one. They were both filled with angry hunters who believed she had killed the Speaker for the Oracle and destroyed the Oracle itself.

She could go back the way she had come. But that would only lead her back into the central den. She couldn’t risk that they had left someone behind in case she doubled back.

She looked again at the two choices. One of them led to the manhole that would let her put the underground behind her. She didn’t know where the other would lead her, so she did the only thing she could.

“Eeny, meeny, miny, moe.”

She took a step when she heard the loud snap of something discharge behind her followed by two distinct sharp pains in her back as small needles stabbed into her. Then her teeth clamped shut and her whole body went rigid with piercing agony as ten thousand volts coursed through her body.

She fell on her back and stayed conscious long enough to look up into the face of Wayne, the same insane soldier who had taken Max. He smiled down at her. “I lost one o’ ya. But I got the other one.”

He turned away from her and held a cell phone to his ear and spoke into it. “Mr. Ecks. It’s me, Wayne. I have her. Yes, sir. I will bring her right to you.”

So Max had escaped from Wayne. She was glad to hear that. Wayne hung up and turned to her. He held up the Taser he had used to subdue her and smiled wickedly. “Nighty, night.”

He pulled the trigger and thousands of volts hit her like a tidal wave. As the spasming agony made the world around her fade to black, she hoped that wherever Max was, he was in a better position than she was.

Chapter 28

Max fell quickly through the sky, the ground rushing up at him faster than he would have preferred. He spun out of control as he fell and only briefly spotted the massive dark shape as it came at him sideways.

In a quick flash he recognized it as the limousine. But why was the rear door open? The limo slid sideways and caught him in mid-air like a baseball colliding with an open catcher's mitt. He tumbled through the door, landing on the plush carpet of the floor with a soft thud. Picking himself up, he patted himself quickly with shaking hands to see if there was any damage. Every bone and joint seemed to have survived intact. His wide eyes scanned the interior compartment when the limo quickly changed direction. He tumbled headfirst into the leather seats as the door closed and the limo leveled out.

The center divider slid down noiselessly and the driver glanced at Max in the rear view mirror. He was talking to someone on his cell phone. "I have him. Yes, sir. As soon as I have the cube, I'll bring them both to you."

He hung up the phone and looked at Max in the mirror again. "My name is Ajax Cortez and I will be your driver today. Sit back and relax, kid. I'll get that cube and then Ecks will get us out of here. All of us. You. Me. Your girlfriend. And Thomas."

Max was about to reflexively respond that Terri wasn't his girlfriend when he froze with his mouth hanging open in shock. How did this guy know who he was?

Chapter 29

1X sat back in his chair and removed his headphones. He had just received confirmation from his new allies in the game that both Max and Terri had been captured. Ajax promised he would soon have Thomas, who was already trapped inside a cube.

He looked around at the dingy cement walls of his nuclear bomb shelter. Out here, he was called 1X, but everyone inside the ROBLOX world knew him as Juan Ecks.

He had spent considerable time deciding whether to let everyone call him by the same phonetically sounding name in the game as he was called by his enemies in the real world. He finally decided it was the perfect alliteration.

No.

It was more than perfect.

He chuckled to himself as he stood up and walked over to the large faded world map tacked to the wall.

He placed a red pin in Mexico.

His worm program hadn't delivered his payload throughout the Mexican government networks yet, but it was only a matter of time.

Soon he would control all of North America.

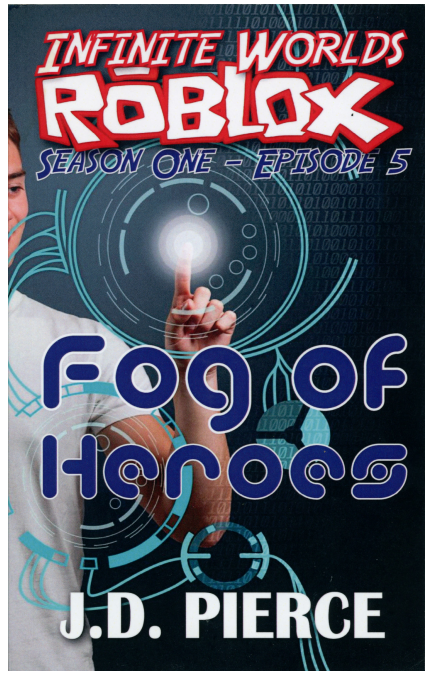
And after that?

He smiled to himself as he thought about what came next. It was about to get interesting.

The Adventure Continues…

Season One - Episode 5

Fog of Heroes



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